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Trust restores trees / Vertrauen versetzt Bäume

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Abstract: Die Wälder im Nordwesten Pakistans sind bedroht. Sie überleben nur, wenn die Bevölkerung und die lokalen Behörden bei der Bewirtschaftung und beim Schutz konstruktiv zusammenarbeiten. Ein Forschungsprojekt zeigt, wie sich das schwierige Verhältnis zwischen ihnen verbessern lässt. The forests in northwestern Pakistan are being threatened. They will survive only if the population and the local authorities can manage to work together constructively to solve problems. A research project shows how the difficult relationship between them can be improved.

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Trust restores trees

Urs Geiser and Babar Shahbaz

The forests in northwestern Pakistan are being threatened. They will survive only if the population and the local authorities can manage to work together constructively to solve problems. A research project shows how the difficult relationship between them can be improved.

Pakistan's forests are under enormous pressure from use and increasingly are disappearing. For years, now, the international community has sought ways to halt this development. Consequently, it has supported the Forest Department of the North-West Frontier Province (where most forests are located) in searching solutions, for instance, by improving training in forestry. Great hopes were pinned on pilot projects whose goal was to set up Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs). These committees consist of representatives of forest authorities and members of the public (forest owners, non-owner users, non-governmental organisations etc.). Together they manage the forests and work for their protection. But success is elusive: very few of the JFMCs really function, and Pakistan's forests continue to be degraded.

The JFMC approach has proven itself many times over, for example, in India. The central question of our research project was to understand why it is so difficult to implement this type of sustainable forest management practice in Pakistan. To find out, the North-South network funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation supported a research partnership between the Development Study Group (DSGZ) of the Department of Geography of the University of Zurich, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Islamabad, and the Agricultural University of Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Wary of the state

Our research became an exciting voyage deep into the social reality of north-western Pakistan. Layer



Pakistan's forests are under pressure not least from the illegal activities of wood smugglers.

Partner institutions

The Development Study Group (DSGZ) comprises members of the Department of Geography of the University of Zurich, who deal with development issues. Research focuses on the social, institutional and political processes of change, as well as the question of how people secure their livelihood in adverse circumstances (www.geo.uzh.ch/en/units/hgg).

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The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Islamabad, Pakistan, is a nongovernmental research institute concerned with questions of sustainable development. In addition to its own research, the SDPI gives high priority to the policy dialogue between civil society and state actors (www.sdpi.org).

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by layer, we had to revise our assumptions about how the population was organised and the role it played in the use of the forests. The seemingly unquestioned legitimacy of the forest authorities hid tensions. Ultimately, our principal finding was that many Pakistanis perceived the state – in the context of forestry – as an alien presence not to be trusted.

The explanation for this mistrust is the post-colonial history of the country. The state of Pakistan was formed in 1947. Large portions of north-western Pakistan – where many forests are situated – only formally became part of the country in 1969. Up until then, the ownership and use of the forests was governed by common and rigid law based on heterogeneous tribal structures. When the region was brought into the Pakistan nation, the relationship changed overnight. Pakistan extended the forestry legislation to the area, declaring forests as the property of the state, with greatly restricted local use rights. Even today, many people in the region consider the state regulations on forest use to be an imposition and perceive themselves as «genuine» custodians of the forests.

This explains in large measure why the JFMCs are having so little success. The contested forest legislation provides the legal basis for the JFMCs. When the villagers join these committees, they must accept the situation. Consequently, in Pakistan, «joint forest management» does not necessarily mean that the locally important and deep-rooted traditional regulations of access to forests are respected. In fact, many people per-



Members of a village group in north-western Pakistan discuss forest issues.

ceive the JFMCs to be state-dominated organisations. Because the international development partnership remains focused on supporting state agencies – often with good reason – many locals also see the development organisations as «biased».

Understanding and freedom

Our Pakistani partners are interested in applying findings from research to daily life. Because cooperation between state officials and the local population is often complicated by the lack of trust explained above, they proposed the concept of independent mediators. Through a pilot project, they made contact with selected villages and with the responsible authorities. After a few months of mediation, they had gained the confidence of both sides, and organised round tables. In this way, villagers were able to articulate their needs, and the officials of the state at the local level granted them greater freedom in using the forests. But this was only a first, small step on the long road to really working together. When the forest officials were transferred, the villagers had to fight for their interests all over again. They managed to do that by joining forces with an action group. Now they are planning a workshop in the provincial capital with the aim of involving higher-up officials in the process as well. What will happen next is open.

Key findings

- Regulations on the use of forests often reflect deeper-lying social tensions. Addressing these issues requires research that takes a critical look at the balance of power.
- State agencies play an important role in the development process, but they are frequently not neutral. Consequently, many people question the legitimacy of authorities. Donor organisations that work together with state agencies must be aware of this political reality.
- Too often, development organisations believe that their approach is neutral and unpolitical. However, our research shows that development is part of a profoundly political process that North-supported projects can unwittingly be drawn into.
- Within the state agencies, the conception of «change» (as for example supported by development donors) often does not trickle down to the lower staff who are the actual implementers on the ground.